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Agency News

Legislative update for TDCJ employees from the executive director

By Brad Livingston, Executive Director

Budget

The General Appropriations Bill (SB 1 by Williams) was passed out of the Finance Committee on March 13 and approved by the full Senate on March 20. Senate Bill 1 was referred to the House Appropriations Committee, where the committee members had already spent weeks preparing their version of the state's budget for next two years. The House's budget proposal was approved by the committee and subsequently approved by the House floor on April 4.

As always, the budgets approved by both the House and Senate differ in ways that must be resolved by a conference committee consisting of members from both bodies. Reconciling the differences will be one of the most important tasks facing the Legislature during the remainder of the session, and is typically not completed until late in May.

Although all information is preliminary and subject to change, currently the fiscal outlook for the agency is very positive, particularly when compared to the situation two years ago. A more comprehensive

summary of how the proposed House and Senate budgets would impact the Texas Department of Criminal Justice is available on the agency website, but I want to briefly highlight a few developments that should be of particular interest to TDCJ employees.

- With very few exceptions, the budgets approved by the House and Senate maintain our "base" funding from the previous biennium.
- Both the House and Senate have approved a 5 percent pay raise for correctional officer positions (Correctional Officers through Wardens, Laundry Managers and Food Service Managers). The potential also exists for other salary increases affecting all or a limited number of agency staff.
- Both the House and Senate budgets provide badly needed funding for vehicle replacement, as well as funding to replace obsolete computers.

One other issue of note is related to recent declines in the offender population. For

various reasons, to include the Legislature's investment in treatment and diversion programs, the inmate population has decreased



and stabilized. Consequently, state policymakers are considering whether to close one or more correctional facilities. Discussions regarding unit closures have focused on several privately-operated facilities in north Texas.

There is no question the fiscal situation for the state and the agency is markedly improved from two years ago, however, I cannot emphasize enough that the information available today is preliminary. Final deci-

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sions regarding appropriations for fiscal years 2014 – 15 will be made no earlier than May 2013. As the final decisions are made, we will continue to keep employees informed through the agency's website and the Connections newsletter.

Sunset

Senate Bill 213 by Whitmire and House Bill 2289 by Price contain the Sunset Commission's recommendations for the Department of Criminal Justice, Board of Pardons and Paroles, Windham School District and the Correctional Managed Health Care Committee. As filed, both bills would extend the life of the agency by another eight years as well as enact other recommendations from the Sunset Advisory Commission.

Senate Bill 213 was approved by the Senate Criminal Justice Committee on March 19. The bill was amended several times in committee, but none of the changes impacted TDCJ. The bill was considered by the full Senate on April 2, and was approved by a unanimous vote after the adoption of several amendments related to Correctional Managed Health Care.

Senate Bill 213 has now been sent to the House of Representatives where, subsequent to its consideration by the Corrections Committee, the bill will be heard on the House floor. We will continue to keep employees apprised of the status of the TDCJ Sunset legislation. ●